



# Why IFS is Central to My Practice

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Since first training in Internal Family Systems (IFS) in 2011, it has become a cornerstone of my integrative practice. IFS provides an elegant framework for psychological healing and growth, and its increasing popularity is well-deserved. In this piece, I want to highlight the features I find especially significant, particularly how IFS honors both our psychological complexity and our inherent capacity for healing while providing a practical methodology that clients can use long after therapy ends.

## Understanding Internal Family Systems

IFS, developed by Richard Schwartz in the 1980s (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2020), starts with a simple observation: we all contain different parts. These parts are distinct aspects of our personality, each with its own feelings, beliefs, and motivations. You might recognize the part of you that pushes for achievement, another that procrastinates, one that seeks connection, another that fears vulnerability. This multiplicity represents the natural architecture of human consciousness.

The model recognizes three general categories of parts. Exiles are often young parts carrying pain, fear, shame, or other overwhelming emotions from past experiences. They may hover near awareness or remain deeply hidden by our protective system. Managers work proactively to keep us functional and prevent exiled feelings from surfacing through various strategies such as control, planning, criticism, or caretaking. Firefighters react when emotional discomfort breaks through despite managers' efforts, employing emergency measures like rage, dissociation, binge eating, or substance use to extinguish emotional pain.

Central to IFS is the concept of Self. Self is our core consciousness, always present beneath the activity of parts, unable to be damaged regardless of what we've experienced. When we create some space from our parts, what IFS calls unblending, we discover qualities like curiosity, calm, clarity, compassion, confidence, creativity, courage, and connectedness. These qualities naturally emerge when parts relax their roles.

People experience their parts in varied ways. Some have a clear sense of inner figures they can visualize and dialogue with directly. Others experience parts more as subtle feelings, energetic shifts, or patterns of thinking. The form doesn't matter as much as developing the capacity to recognize and relate to these different aspects of ourselves.

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## The Therapeutic Process

IFS therapy follows a general arc, though the work remains flexible and responsive to each person's system. The process typically begins with identifying parts through various trailheads: a triggering incident from the week, inner ambivalence about a decision, experiencing being stuck or unable to do something we want to do, physical sensations or chronic pain, recurring relationship patterns, or simply noticing different voices in our internal dialogue. We might recognize a critical voice and practice opening up space around it, observing it rather than being consumed by it. The question "How do you feel toward that part?" helps assess whether we're observing from Self (feeling curious or compassionate) or from another part (feeling angry or afraid).

Once someone can access Self-presence, we begin developing relationships with protective parts, both managers and firefighters. Rather than trying to eliminate or overcome these parts, we approach them with curiosity about their roles and concerns. A perfectionist part might reveal it's trying to prevent the shame of failure. A part that stirs up chaos might be working to distract from painful loneliness.

As we understand and appreciate these protective parts, we can ask permission to work with the exiles they protect. This respects the protective system's wisdom; protectors know what they're guarding against and won't allow access until they trust it's safe.

When we do connect with exiles, we witness their experiences and provide what was missing originally. An exile holding the terror of abandonment might need to experience Self's consistent presence. One carrying shame might need to receive compassion and understanding. Sometimes we help them experience different outcomes in their original situations, discovering their own agency or receiving the protection they needed. Through this witnessing and reworking of experience, exiles can release their burdens---the extreme beliefs and emotions they've carried.

The culmination often involves an unburdening ceremony where exiles ceremonially release their burdens. What emerges after unburdening are the parts' natural qualities that were obscured: playfulness, creativity, openness, joy. Protective parts, seeing that exiles no longer carry such intense pain, can then relax their extreme roles and choose preferred roles in the system, such as moving from harsh critic to discerning advisor, or from rigid controller to helpful organizer.

This represents only the most general outline of a process filled with nuance, individuality, and creative possibility. Truly understanding IFS requires experiencing it directly, as the intellectual framework only hints at the lived experience of parts work.

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## What I Value About IFS

### 1. A Sophisticated Understanding of the Psyche

The parts and Self model offers a phenomenologically accurate map of consciousness. It elegantly accounts for our inner contradictions, ambivalences, and conflicts without resorting to pathologizing labels. The person who simultaneously craves and fears intimacy makes perfect sense when understood as containing different parts with different agendas based on different experiences.

The concept of unblending provides a practical tool for differentiating from our experiences. For example, we shift from "I am depressed" to "A part of me feels depressed," creating space for curiosity and relationship rather than fusion and identification. This cultivates what contemplative traditions call witness consciousness, yet with a crucial relational dimension. We're entering into relationship with aspects of our psyche rather than merely observing impersonal mental phenomena.

Experiencing Self as an undamaged core that surfaces when parts step back transforms our understanding of ourselves. We discover our worth already exists within us, waiting to be accessed rather than constructed or earned. This principle remains compatible with various spiritual traditions without requiring metaphysical belief. Whether one views Self through a spiritual or purely psychological lens, the phenomenological reality remains consistent: when parts unblend, qualities like compassion, clarity, and courage naturally arise.

The model also recognizes that establishing inner communication transforms our internal landscape. Parts that have operated in isolation, often for decades, finally have the opportunity to be heard and understood. The inner critic discovers it doesn't have to work so hard when other parts of the system are attending to its concerns about safety and worth. The exile carrying long-held shame can finally share its story with a compassionate witness.

Perhaps most importantly, IFS provides a framework that actually matches lived experience. We've all noticed our multiplicity: the part that knows we need rest while another drives us forward, the confidence in one context and anxiety in another, the harsh self-criticism that triggers rebellious pushback. IFS gives us language and method for working with what we've always sensed but perhaps never had words to describe.

### 2. A Non-Pathologizing Perspective

IFS offers a radical departure from medical model thinking. Rather than diagnosing disorders, it recognizes protective strategies and underlying wounds. There are no bad parts, only parts using outdated or extreme strategies to protect a system.

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Every symptom reveals its own logic when understood in context. Someone who struggles to maintain relationships might have a part that learned intimacy means engulfment or abandonment. Someone struggling with addiction has firefighter parts trying to regulate a dysregulated system. These patterns represent creative adaptations to difficult circumstances. Even common childhood experiences can feel overwhelming at certain developmental stages, leading to defensive patterns that persist long after they're needed.

This perspective extends beyond individual psychology. IFS recognizes that parts can carry legacy burdens: pain and patterns transmitted across generations. Parts also absorb cultural burdens from collective trauma and societal wounds. This expanded lens helps explain why someone might carry deep shame without clear personal origin, or why certain fears seem to echo ancestral experience. We're not isolated monads but permeable beings existing within nested systems of influence.

Understanding our parts' protective logic naturally evokes compassion rather than judgment. When we recognize that even our most destructive patterns arose from attempts to ensure survival or maintain attachment, the entire therapeutic landscape shifts. We move from trying to eliminate symptoms to understanding their purpose and supporting creative adaptation.

### **3. The Inward Turn**

Parts work epitomizes what I call the inward turn. While working to improve external circumstances has genuine value, this approach inevitably reaches limits. We can't control others' behavior, we can't always reshape our environment, and external solutions don't address our internal relationship to experience.

IFS redirects attention to where we have authentic agency: our own consciousness. The shift from "they make me angry" to "a part of me becomes angry" transforms us from victims of circumstance to curious investigators of our own protective responses. We discover that what seems to be about others was always about our parts' attempts to protect us from perceived threat.

The model embraces a comprehensive exposure paradigm. Avoidance of internal experience often drives and deepens our challenges---the more we avoid our pain, the more our protectors must work to keep it at bay. IFS offers a different path: turning toward difficult internal experiences with Self-presence as our resource. Every trigger becomes a trailhead, every reaction reveals information about our system, every defensive pattern points toward something requiring attention. This orientation builds remarkable psychological capacity. As we practice approaching rather than avoiding our inner experience, we develop a kind of emotional fitness that extends throughout our lives.

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IFS addresses root causes with precision rather than managing surface symptoms. We don't simply learn coping strategies for anxiety. Instead, we discover which parts generate anxious states, what they're protecting against, and what experiences taught them that hypervigilance is necessary for survival. We don't just cope with depression; we understand which parts are shutting down the system and what overwhelming feelings they're trying to contain. Through this precision, lasting transformation becomes possible.

The embodied nature of the work grounds it in somatic reality rather than intellectual abstraction. Parts aren't concepts but lived experiences with distinct somatic signatures. That constriction in our throat, the heaviness in our chest, the tension in our shoulders---these are parts communicating through the body. Healing happens at the level of the nervous system, creating change that cognitive understanding alone cannot achieve.

Importantly, the more we unblend from parts, the more we experience Self; the more we experience Self, the easier it becomes to recognize and differentiate from parts. This creates a positive feedback loop toward increasing clarity and compassion.

#### **4. The Symphony of Therapeutic Mechanisms**

What fascinates me as a practitioner is how IFS seems to naturally operationalize virtually every evidence-based therapeutic mechanism without forcing or artifice. Unblending creates cognitive defusion as we gain distance from our thoughts and emotions. Mapping our internal system develops metacognitive awareness as we observe the patterns and relationships between parts. Understanding parts' defensive patterns builds mentalization capacity. Witnessing parts with kindness and care facilitates the development of genuine self-compassion.

The model naturally reflects attachment theory through the cultivation of Self-to-part relationships. Self becomes the attuned caregiver our exiles have been seeking, the supportive companion our managers need to feel less alone in their responsibilities, and the regulating presence our firefighters require. Through these internal relationships, it seems we can facilitate corrective attachment experiences where parts receive the attunement, validation, and security they didn't receive originally. This internal reworking of attachment patterns may profoundly reorganize how we relate both internally and externally.

Memory reconsolidation can occur throughout the IFS process, particularly during unburdening. When we retrieve painful memories while simultaneously experiencing Self's compassion and providing new relational experiences, we create the precise conditions neuroscience tells us are necessary for updating traumatic memories. This reaches deeper than insight or catharsis, creating lasting neurobiological change.

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What makes these mechanisms especially potent is that they tend to reinforce one another. As a person develops more Self-presence, they can relate to their parts with greater curiosity, which often allows those parts to soften and share more. As parts soften, the system becomes more accessible, and what began as a small opening can build into broader and deeper change. The model seems to generate its own momentum toward healing.

## 5. Genuine Empowerment

IFS fundamentally restructures the therapeutic relationship by positioning the client's deeper Self as the primary healing agent. Therapists serve as facilitators and guides rather than experts delivering interpretations or prescribing solutions. This recognizes that sustainable transformation emerges from accessing internal wisdom rather than depending on external authority.

The model respects our protective system's inherent intelligence. Protectors maintain veto power over pacing, ensuring we never move faster than our system can metabolize. They know what dangers they're guarding against, what the system can handle, and when it's safe to proceed. This built-in safeguarding prevents retraumatization while honoring the sophisticated wisdom of our psychological defenses.

All of what I've discussed would be reason enough to lead with IFS, but perhaps the single biggest factor in my appreciation is how it becomes a lifelong skill. Once people learn to recognize and work with their parts, they carry this capacity forever. They develop a way of understanding and relating to themselves that extends far beyond the therapy room and long after therapy ends. Morning anxiety becomes an opportunity to check in with worried parts. Relationship triggers become chances to explore what got activated. Creative blocks reveal parts needing attention. Life itself becomes the practice ground for deepening Self-presence and understanding one's internal system. This portability means that healing and growth continue indefinitely, independent of professional support.

Understanding parts transforms our relationships with others. We begin recognizing others' defensive patterns with compassion, using parts language to depersonalize conflicts, and maintaining Self-presence even when others' parts are activated. "A part of me is feeling frustrated" lands differently than "You're so frustrating." I'm confident that this shift from interpersonal reactivity to systems awareness creates ripple effects through families and communities as individuals heal and relate from a different consciousness. It would be enough that IFS helps heal our wounds and improve our relationships. But the implications of this work extend even further.

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## Beyond Healing to Growth

IFS offers more than symptom relief or trauma resolution. It provides a pathway for ongoing growth and self-discovery that continues throughout life. As we unburden exiles and help protectors relax their extreme roles, we don't simply return to baseline functioning. We discover capacities and qualities that were always present but obscured by protective layering.

This is where IFS becomes what some experience as a spiritual practice. The process of differentiating from parts and accessing Self resembles contemplative practices across traditions. We're discovering who we truly are beneath accumulated strategies and defenses. Each unburdening reveals more of our essential nature. Each relationship with a part deepens our capacity for compassion and understanding.

The journey continues indefinitely because there's always more to discover, deeper layers to explore, greater capacity for Self-embodiment. This transforms therapy from a process of fixing problems into an exploration of human potential and becoming more fully ourselves.

## Conclusion

Like any therapeutic approach, IFS works best for those who resonate with its framework. It requires an interest in the inner world and a willingness to look beyond external problem solving. While remarkably comprehensive, it doesn't optimally address every issue. Some with severe psychiatric symptoms will still benefit from medication. Someone with severe sleep disruption may benefit from specific protocols like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia (CBT-I).

That said, in my study of numerous therapeutic modalities, I find IFS to be the most integrative of all psychotherapy models. It naturally incorporates elements from cognitive, somatic, psychodynamic, and systems approaches while maintaining its own coherent framework.

For those who resonate with this approach, IFS offers something remarkable: a sophisticated yet accessible framework for understanding consciousness, a methodology that naturally activates healing mechanisms, and a practice that extends beyond therapy into daily life. It honors both our wounds and our wisdom, our protective habits and our furthest potential.

What I love most about IFS is its fundamental trust in our inherent capacity for healing and growth. After years of practice, I continue to be moved by the courage of parts willing to share their stories, the ingenuity of protective strategies that helped us survive, and the profound reorganization that occurs when burdens are released. Most of all, I'm touched by witnessing people access Self and recognize, often for the first time, the unshakeable presence that has

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always been there.

For those curious about IFS, I invite you to notice your own multiplicity. Pay attention to the different voices within you, the conflicting desires, the protective patterns. And experiment with asking yourself, "How do you feel toward that part?" That simple question lies at the threshold of an entire world waiting to be discovered.

## References

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